

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Maya Dunietz & Friends: Emahoy Tsege Mariam Gebru

Sunday 4 May 2025, 6pm | Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

However you choose to experience the endlessly inventive world of classical music, we're so glad that you're doing it here with us. Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2025.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Gebru:

Let not my cry be in vain	4'
If somebody deserts you	6'
Mamuye	5'
Why are you sad, my sister?	5'
Mother Ethiopia	6'
Lord's Prayer	5'
Quand la mer arr. Maya Dunietz for voice, viola & cello (French)	7'
Spring ode arr. Maya Dunietz for strings	10'
Ballad of the spirits arr. Maya Dunietz for piano & strings	8'
Evening breeze arr. Maya Dunietz for piano & strings	5'
Lasciami cantare arr. Maya Dunietz for voice & strings (Italian, English and Amharic)	8'

Performers

London Sinfonietta *string ensemble*

Maya Dunietz *singer, piano*

Sofia Jernberg *singer*

When Emahoy Tsege Mariam Gebru died in 2023 in her one hundredth year, the writer Kate Molleson termed her life 'some of the most extraordinary 99 years ever lived on this earth!'

Gebru ('Emahoy' means 'sister', a female monk) was born Yewubdar Gebru, into the upper echelons of Ethiopian society; sent to a Swiss boarding school aged six, she was among the first Ethiopian girls to receive such an education. When Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and deposed Haile Selassie, the family were deported to an isolated Italian island and spent three years in hiding, before Gebru was able in 1941 to go to Cairo for further musical study.

Back in Addis Ababa, she was offered a full scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music in London – but mysteriously she was refused a visa to leave Ethiopia. Devastated, she went on hunger strike and nearly died. Upon recovering, she took holy orders; she spent the next decade barefoot and musicless in an isolated monastery in the mountains. The harsh regime eventually took a toll on her health. She returned to her family, and amid Addis Ababa's flourishing 1960s musical scene, she made several recordings. In the 1980s, with drought, famine and a Stalinist regime shattering the country, she escaped to Israel, entering the Ethiopian Orthodox monastery in Jerusalem where she spent the rest of her life.

In 2005, hearing Gebru's album *Éthiopiennes*, Maya Dunietz was struck by her music's sense of malleably flowing time and the personal, distinctly Ethiopian voice that infused the classical structures. Dunietz and the conductor Ilan Volkov visited Gebru at the monastery, where, aged 80, she still composed at the piano every morning; Dunietz gave her her phone number, offering help if required.

Two years later, the call came. Gebru handed Dunietz several Air Ethiopia bags filled with crumpled manuscripts, saying, 'I want to make a book.' Although visitors often asked her for sheet music, her work had never been published. She hoped this might raise money for musical education for children in need.

With support from Jerusalem Season of Culture, Dunietz began transcribing 12 pieces for piano – a painstaking

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes, including an interval.

process resembling 'an archaeological dig', she says, since the manuscripts were in 'note to self' style, with no barlines and only sketchy indications of accompaniments. When Dunietz began to perform the piano pieces, then arranged some for string orchestra, it brought Gebru deserved acclaim at last.

During their long and close collaboration, Dunietz says, she found the composer both tender and opinionated: 'She hated it when people used too much pedal or played too loudly.' Their connection was intense, with a shared sense of 'sadness and fire'. Crucially, Gebru built Dunietz' confidence as a pianist, saying, 'Yes, that's the right way: you're playing music. You're not just playing notes.'

'When she played for me, I realised that mistakes and tempo don't matter. The tempo comes from the music, not the other way around. She said: "The tempo depends on the day." That really changed my life.'

But much more music awaited discovery. Tonight's concert includes the first performances in decades of some of Gebru's songs.

'When I first asked about her songs,' Dunietz relates, 'she said, "Look in the corner – there is a bag with some tapes. Take it and see if there's something interesting." I digitised all the tapes and discovered a treasure-trove of dozens of songs in eight languages.' All of them set Gebru's own poetry. 'There is so much love, softness and sorrow in the lyrics, with a huge wound at the core,' Dunietz says. Gebru never disclosed the nature of that wound.

The songs span the composer's life from her teens to the 1970s and beyond. 'Their sound-world is strikingly different from her instrumental music,' Dunietz says. 'In her songs, she often takes a single melodic motif and explores it fully, while in her instrumental works she develops those ideas through repetition and reinforcement.'

Recurring themes include heartbreak, loneliness, exile, nature and faith. Some are prayer-like; others pay tribute to her family or her homeland. Sorrow and spiritual searching run deep, along with a hope for healing – a 'soul nourishment' through music.

Let not my cry be in vain (English)

'Here I feel drawn to the unique relationship between melody and accompaniment,' Dunietz says. 'She uses broken chords in the piano, the first note of each arpeggio subtly doubling the vocal line. It's a small but striking idea that perfectly anchors the piece.'

If somebody deserts you (English)

'This is a song of total loneliness and heartbreak,' Dunietz says, speculating that it is connected to that emotional wound. 'The message is sad, yet there is alchemy in the music that transforms agony into beauty. It's as if the sea is washing the sorrow away.'

Mamuya (Amharic)

Why are you so sad, my sister? (Amharic)

Mother Ethiopia (Amharic)

'The Amharic songs speak of love in different forms more than the other languages, which speak often of loneliness,' Dunietz suggests. In the first of these three, a mother sings of her love to her child; in the second, the poet finds her sister's eyes

filling with tears; and finally there is a love song from Gebru to the many beauties of her country, which is also likened to a mother figure.

Lord's Prayer (in eight languages)

'This is a prayer for peace. I added it because I thought we needed one,' Dunietz says. 'We sing it in Hebrew and Amharic together.'

Quand la mer (French)

The furious sea becomes a metaphor for inner turmoil and the struggle to survive through love and faith. Gebru creates a unique dialogue here between sung lines and whispered asides that reflect on their meaning.

Spring Ode – strings

Spring Ode was originally a substantial harmonium improvisation, which Guèbrou recorded in the 1980s. Evoking the return of sunlight and blossoming life, it is full of childlike joy and a flowing, time-suspending quality. The composer, Dunietz relates, loved spring, which brought longed-for relief from winter cold.

Ballad of the Spirits – piano and strings

This work was commissioned by Gebru's eldest sister, Dr Senedu Gebru, director of the Empress Menen girls' boarding school, for an end-of-year play in the presence of the Emperor Haile Selassie, his family, government ministers and the students' parents. 'I was a nun and I didn't want to play in front of people,' Gebru wrote, 'so she arranged a curtain, so people might not see me.' Her sister wrote the play, *The Book of My Heart*, in memory of young soldiers shot by fascists during the invasion of Ethiopia and dedicated it to their youngest brother, Meshesha Gebru, who was killed aged 18. Tonight the ballad is heard in Dunietz' new arrangement.

Evening breeze – piano and strings

In this older instrumental piece, Gebru again embraces the theme of nature: 'You can hear the wind inside the melody,' Dunietz says. It is dedicated to Gebru's sister and her daughter Goh-Alem Assefa, amid what Gebru's inscription describes as 'dissolving memories'.

Lasciami cantare (Italian, English and Amharic) – voice and strings

This song was composed while Gebru and her family were exiled in Italy. A song of exceptional beauty, it is about longing, solitude, the pain of displacement and the enduring hope of return.

Programme note © Jessica Duchon, 2025

Find out more

- ▶ London Sinfonietta string ensemble
- ▶ Maya Dunietz
- ▶ Sofia Jernberg
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk